

Young boys and Girls learning English as a Foreign Language: Teacher-Student Interactions in and English immersion kindergarten in Japan: Part 1

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The materials reported in this article are part of an MA dissertation in TESL/TEFL submitted to the University of Birmingham by the writer. This small case study attempts to examine the role of a Female teacher and the amount and type of attention she pays to her mixed-sex classroom of young Japanese learners in an immersion english kindergarten classroom. Methodologically, Sinclair and Coulthard's classroom discourse analysis framework, and Farooq's categories for analyzing gender-based classroom interaction were adopted and modified in order to analyze transcribed classroom data of the teacher-student interactions which were then coded into the designated categories. As the space in this article does not allow the entire dissertation of 265 pages, including transcripts and appendixes, the present report is focused on identifying the problem and its significance, as well as to provide a literature review and outline the objectives of the study based on gaps and recommendations from the literature review.

1 Introduction

The study of EFL in Japan has been upheld from as early as the Meiji era (1868-1911). The government has long supported 'authentic' English language education with help from modern methodologies adopted from western culture (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006). Recently in 2014, in anticipation of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the Ministry of Education implemented a "full-scale development of new English education in Japan" (MEXT, 2014) which includes English Language Activities classes starting in elementary school third grade, and English Language as a subject starting in elementary school fifth grade. English is compulsory in junior and senior high schools, and many universities require that students take English language classes in their first two years, even if they are non-English majors (Hosoki, 2011). It is also not uncommon for very young children to learn english, either in a regular or international kindergarten or in 'English conversation' classes (eikaiwa) in private language schools or companies. Many kindergartens and eikaiwa even offer infant and mother classes where mothers are taught ways to English at home with their babies.

Throughout primary and secondary education in Japan, English is important to all students, particularly because of its role in entrance exams for senior high schools, colleges and universities (LoCastro, 1996).

Once students reach university, however, it is likely that more girls will major in English Language and English Literature than boys, who generally enter into areas such as engineering, math, and science, (Nagamoto, 2016). Sunderland (2000b, online) further elaborates,

“in many cultural contexts women and girls tend to obtain better results (e.g. Arnot et al.,1996), to choose languages more when there is subject choice, and to be better represented as students in University Language Departments, and as language teachers in schools and in Higher Education”

Many Japanese girls also travel abroad as exchange students, for home stays, or working holidays in order to strengthen their English communication skills. Recently in Japan, societal orientation towards women working and building careers has changed and more women are pursuing English-Language learning in order to enhance their career prospects. Bailey (2006, p.109) suggests that “in modern Japan the use of English is a fashionable, cosmopolitan, and progressive practice that is seen and understood clearly by women in particular to be socially, professionally, and personally empowering”. This would imply that female English learners in Japan are likely to be more willing to continue their studies past secondary schooling, and should therefore be considered as more serious and motivated learners than their male counterparts.

However, there is extensive literature, discussed in the following chapter, suggesting that both male and female teachers in content classrooms, such as math, science, and social studies, spend more time interacting with boys than with girls. The same can also be said about second and foreign language classrooms, although the literature is not quite as extensive. Jule, (2004, p.2) asserts that “the time is ripe for more, perhaps different, discussions concerning gender in language education because it has been largely ignored in such classrooms while debates have flourished elsewhere”. Furthermore, Sunderland (2000a, p.161) specifies that “one under-explored question is whether, because foreign languages tend to be subjects in which women and girls do well, this ‘differential teacher treatment by gender’ may be less salient, or manifested in particular ways”. If there are marked and consistent patterns in the ways that teachers interact with their male and female students, what are these tendencies and what are their implications? If teachers of young children are paying more attention to boys, what kind of message does this send to girls and are they putting them at a disadvantage as far as learning and speaking opportunities? In the case of foreign-language learners, opportunities for language input and output may be extremely limited and possibly only occur in the classroom. The problem is that English language teachers who spend more time asking questions and providing feedback to male students are bound to affect the learning opportunities of female students.

Research on foreign and second language teaching have directed much attention to the importance of teachers’ questioning strategies. “Teachers’ questions constitute a primary means of engaging learners’ attention, promoting verbal responses, and evaluating learners’ progress” (Chaudron, 1988, p126; see also Brown, 1994, p164-168; and Richard and Lockhart 1996, p185-187). A considerable amount of research has also focused on the significance of providing feedback (including praise and criticism) and error correction to language learners. Error correction is often thought of as “one of the language teacher’s

most important functions [...and is] one of the things which distinguishes classroom interaction from interaction outside the classroom” (Nunan, 1989, p.31). With regards to the importance of questions and feedback in the language classroom, McDonough and Shaw (1995, p.271-273) provide the following advice:

Evidence [...] tends to suggest that the questions a teacher asks in the classroom can be extremely important in helping learners to develop their competence in the language. It is useful to observe if teachers put questions to learners systematically or randomly, how long they wait for a response, and the type of question asked. [...] Similarly, in the case of feedback and correcting learners, we can observe how and when the teacher does this and if all learners receive treatment systematically.

This study aims to examine the classroom of a female teacher in an English immersion kindergarten in Japan, and the role of the attention she pays to her male and female students in the forms of her questions and the feedback she provides to their responses.

The report first reviews background literature concerning issues with gender, education, and the problem of teachers paying more attention to boys in classroom interaction. The next chapter describes the details of the study including the participants and the location. A methodology chapter discusses the collection of data, and the analysis model and how it was modified to fit the needs of the study. After this the findings are presented and discussed, and finally, an evaluation of the outcomes of the study.

2 Review of the Literature

A considerable amount of research has been devoted to gender-based studies with regards to education. This includes studies of gender representation in textbooks, in curriculum, and in classroom interactions. Much of the literature on gender representation in classroom interaction focuses on teacher-student and student-teacher interaction; specifically, teachers’ attention to students and whether or how that attention differs depending on the gender¹ roles and expectations of teachers for their students. This study follows in this tradition. In the following sections, I discuss some of the recent literature regarding gender and education, both in and out of the context of EFL/ESL, focussing on teacher-student and student-teacher interactions. I discuss some of the possible explanations provided in the literature as to why gender-differentiated treatment by teachers happens.

2.1 History of the Problem

In recent decades, classroom interaction between teachers and students has received a great deal of attention both in and out of the field of second language research (SLR). There is now a considerable body of research that suggests that teachers give more attention, including asking more questions and providing more feedback, to male students than female students (Lindow, Marrett, and Wilkinson, 1985; Byrnes, 1994; Swann and Graddoll, 1995; Jule, 2004; Sunderland, 2004; Swann, 2011).

In 1988, Alison Kelly carried out a meta-analysis of “all the available literature on gender differences” (Kelly, 1988, p.1) in teacher-student interaction: 81 studies conducted from the 1970s up to 1986 in a variety of subjects (including math, reading, science and social studies) from a variety of countries (mostly US, but also including British, Australian, Canadian, and Swedish classrooms). She found that “across a range of countries, ages, dates, subjects and social groups” (p.17) girls were consistently under-represented in classroom interactions, including student-initiated interactions. She also found that teachers asked boys more questions and gave them more opportunities to respond. On the other hand, girls volunteered responses and raised their hands more often than the boys. This led Kelly to suggest that “girls were willing to take an equal part in lessons, but were not allowed to do so” (p.6), and it is likely because the boys had more of a tendency to call out and answer open questions. With regards to feedback from teachers, Kelly found that both male and female students were likely to receive equal praise for correct answers, and equal criticism for wrong answers; however girls were more likely to be given sustenance or a second chance to reply after giving an incorrect response. The most significant finding was regarding behavioral criticism, in which boys received a much higher proportion.

Other studies of gender imbalances in classroom interactions conducted in the 1980s and 90s reported similar results. Croll (1985) found that boys in British second-year junior classrooms received a higher average level of individual attention. French and French (1984) reported that in a class where girls were the majority (16 to 13), boys still took more than their fair share of turns (50 for boys, compared to 16 for girls) in a classroom of 10 to 11 year olds. In Merrett and Whendall’s (1992) study of teachers in British primary and secondary schools, the secondary teachers gave more positive and negative feedback (praises and reprimands) to their male students than to their female students. Although, they reported no significant differences between feedback from primary teachers to their male and female students. Sunderland (1994, p.149) reminds us, that while it is often reported that males students receive more attention, it is “not a classroom rule: some studies have not found this to happen”.

The above studies concerning gender differences in classroom interactions were performed across a range of cultures and subjects, all finding similar patterns of differential behavior in favor of boys, including in social studies classes, “some aspects of which are generally considered to be ‘girls’ subjects” (Kelly, 1988, p.17). This would imply that the same results could be found in the language classroom, despite the fact that “in many countries languages are seen by teachers and students as girls’ subjects” (Sunderland, 1994, p.150). Batters (1987, cited in Sunderland, 2000a) noted that boys dominated oral work, even in the target language, in foreign languages, just as they tend to do in general education classes.

Early investigations of teachers' attention in ESL classrooms were conducted by Yepez (1990, cited in Sunderland, 1994 and Farooq, 2009). In a study of seven teachers (4 female, 3 male) of adult ESL learners in the United States, all but one teacher showed equitable behavior to their male and female students. In another similar study, Yepez (1994) observed 2 female and 2 male teachers of 66 adult ESL students. The results were identical to the previous study: all but one of the teachers showed "remarkable equality in their classroom interactions with the genders" (1994, p.121). It is somewhat perplexing, however, that "although both studies by the same researcher related to exactly the same topic and arrived at exactly the same conclusion, Yepez (1994) did not mention or make any reference to the findings of her previous work (1990)" (Farooq, 2009, p.50). Although the results of these studies seem promising, Yepez (1994, p.131) advises that it would be "irresponsible to be complacent about the gender equality issue in ELS classroom; it deserves rigorous attention as a sociolinguistic variable".

Despite the results of Yepez' studies, other EF/SL studies report findings of boys talking more, taking more turns and getting more attention from their teachers. Julé (2004) observed a class of 20 (11 boys, 9 girls) 7-year-old ESL children and found that boys took far more of the 'linguistic space' than girls, a nine to one ratio, and that girls were 'virtually silent'. She also noted that the female teacher asked boys more questions, gave more positive responses to boys, and generally "[did] not seem to be as responsive to the girls in her classroom as she [was] to the boys" (p.100). These observations are somewhat similar to those of Hassaskha and Zamir (2013) in their study done some 10 years later on 20 EFL teachers and 500 adult students in an Iranian College. Women made up 78 percent of the total sample; however, they only accounted for 33 percent of the total interactions. Overall, the teacher-student interactions "were shown to have been overwhelmingly male dominated" (p.8) and that the majority of females were "likely to sit silently, waiting to be called on" (p.8). This suggests that this phenomenon happens whether the students are children or adults.

In an EFL high school classroom in Japan, Farooq (2011) found that the male teacher directed more moves, both academic and non-academic, to boys. He also found that the teacher asked the average boy 19 referential questions, whereas the average girl only received 4. The average boy also gave twice as many responses than the average girl, and the length of those responses were much longer than those of the average girl (31 to 18). Regarding feedback, boys received more affective and positive feedback, but equal negative cognitive feedback to the girls.

An important finding for both language and non-language classrooms is that "the sex of the teacher makes less difference to the way she or he behaves than the sex of her or his students" (Sunderland, 1994, p.148; See also Brophy and Good, 1974; Brophy, 1985). That said, in Rashidi and Naderi's (2012) study of 12 male and 12 female teachers and 358 students in Iranian EFL classrooms, female teachers were said to ask more referential questions, give more compliments and use less directive forms with students than male teachers. Female teachers were also found to encourage "different interactive tasks such as peer and group work in their classes" (p.36). Concerning students' interactional behavior, however, male students initiated more exchanges with teachers, while females preferred to be asked or called upon by the teacher. Therefore, it is perhaps because male students initiate interactions more frequently than females that

“teachers are caused to make interaction more with [them]” (p.31), an idea that will be further discussed in the next section. While all teachers may have different teaching styles and different ways of interacting with their students, in general it seems that both male and female teachers have a tendency to pay more attention to boys than girls.

2.2 Possible Explanations for the Problem

There has been much debate and research into possible explanations for gender differential treatment in classrooms ranging from disruptive boys, teacher mismanagement, or perhaps teachers and students collaborating to create a gendered classroom where boys dominate the linguistic space.

Research focusing on gender and classroom interaction has found that teachers give more behavioral criticism to boys than girls (Kelly, 1988; Merrett and Wheldall, 1992; Sunderland 2000a; Farooq, 2011). In a survey of primary teachers’ beliefs, Altani (1995) discovered that two-thirds of the teachers who responded said they agreed with the statement ‘boys are more disruptive in the classroom than girls’. When asked to explain their beliefs, many teachers gave reasons alluding to ‘the nature of boys’, the way children are socialized, etc. Altani (p.157) stated that many of the teachers’ answers reflected “a common sense essentialist view of gender differences [which] provides support for the argument that teachers’ beliefs are stereotypical and have social origins” (p.157). He argues that these beliefs are subconsciously transmitted to the children and that this is one way in which teachers help to *construct* gender in the classroom.

In her meta-analysis, Kelly, (1988) questions whether patterns of gender differences are due to not boys as a whole but rather a few particularly disruptive boys or a few quiet girls. She was unable to come to a definite conclusion, however, as she found conflicting answers in different studies. She quoted (p.17) Dweck et al. who found that

conduct criticism or intellectually irrelevant criticism was not limited to a few particularly disobedient boys, nor was non-intellectual praise limited to several particularly compliant girls. Rather the pattern of feedback for each sex was quite general across children within classrooms.

This was contradicted by French and French (1984), who found that “the distributional imbalance between boys and girls is manifestly due to a particular, small subset of boys taking a disproportionately high number of turns” (p.128). They go on to discuss how their data gives the impression that some boys engage in strategies to monopolize the attention of teachers by, making unsolicited comments and “tak[ing] up unusual positions on issues of classroom discussion” (ibid p.133).

Jane Sunderland also found similar results in her 1996 study (cited in Farooq, 2011). While her initial findings were based on data for the ‘average boy’ and ‘average girl’, she later (2000a) looked at utterances from individual students and found that two boys received a huge amount of the teacher’s

attention, and that were those boys excluded, “the boys as a group and the girls as a group get broadly the same range of attention” (p.165). She cautions researchers about making generalizations about gendered classroom behavior, as she found that with regard to student-to-teacher talk, “of the eight students who address[ed] most utterances to the teacher, seven [were] girls” (p.160), proving that sometimes the idea that girls are ‘disadvantaged’ is not always relevant. Her findings also clearly suggest that simply looking at differences between girls and boys as groups is not enough, and that diversity between individuals, along with similarities between and within groups must also be recognized.

While many classrooms may indeed have a few rowdy boys, contrarily there are also sometimes rowdy girls. However, Hassaskha and Zamir (2013, p.8) observed that “the number of silent females[...] is remarkably higher than the number of silent males proportional to their enrollment”. Much of the narrative within the literature on gender and classroom interaction focuses on males’ domination of teacher attention and turn taking and how this puts females at a disadvantage. However, another important question might be ‘why do girls have a tendency of silence in the classroom?’. Julé (2004, citing Spender, 1980) suggests that female ESL students, “have received such messages that ‘girls must be more refined’ and [...] their silence may be a deliberate or even reasonable response to being instructed into such silence from their culture or perhaps also by their (white) language teachers” (p.25).

Nonetheless, it is ultimately teachers who control students by controlling the process of classroom discourse. As stated by French and French (1984:132), “Unsolicited contributions from pupils are sanctionable events. It is the prerogative of the teacher to decide whether they be let pass, suppressed or accepted, endorsed and developed.” Some consider imbalances in teacher interaction with male and female students a problem of classroom management (Croll, 1985, Swann 2011) and make suggestions for calling on girls more, even if they are not raising their hands, or changing the seating arrangements in order to make girls more visible. This does not mean that teachers are intentionally bias towards boys, as Hassaskhah and Zamir (2013, p.9) state, “it is hard to believe that there is a teacher, who wakes up in the morning with the intention of excluding any student or class of students, but it happens inadvertently” and this is likely because most teachers are unaware of their seemingly biased behavior. In fact, many studies have shown that teachers not only think they treat their students equitably, they sincerely believe that students should be given equal learning opportunities, and are even in disbelief when confronted with evidence that counter-balances these claims (Spender, 1982; Corson, 1993; Hassaskhah and Zamir, 2013). This is not surprising, however, as patterns of imbalances in male and female language use in the classroom are, according to Coates (2004:192), “ingrained in classroom practice” and even parallel those of public interaction (see also Crawford, 1995; Holmes, 1995).

Not only are many teachers unaware that they may be treating male and female students differently, but even teachers who are aware of the problem find it difficult to provide equitable treatment to their students. In a four-year action research project investigating girls’ under achievement in science and technology, called the GIST project (see Smail and Kelly, 1984, Smail, 1985), teachers were made aware of gender biases in the classroom and attempted to provide equal treatment to their students. In twenty of the lessons teachers accomplished this, however one teacher stated that in order to achieve a balance, he

“*felt* as if ninety per cent of his attention was being devoted to the girls” (Whyte, 1986, cited in Coates 2004, p.194).

Perhaps some classrooms have a few particularly disruptive boys and a few quiet girls, and vice versa. However, the difficulty in trying to achieve a balance in equitable treatment to students should serve as evidence that classroom mismanagement alone is not the root of the problem. Some researchers assert that more turns allotted to boys, and more attention given to boys “involves a collaborative process between the teacher and students rather than intentional behavior” (Pakuła, Pawelczyk, and Sunderland, 2015:16). Sunderland (1994, p.149), suggests that boys may create disciplinary problems so that the teacher feels he or she must constantly watch them, referring to Swann and Graddoll’s (1988) study of teachers’ gaze. If teachers are always watching boys, it is likely that they will not only be disciplined more frequently, but also perhaps be asked more questions and called on more frequently than girls. Swann (2011) discusses a study of two classes. In one class, the students called out rather than being selected by name or raising hands, and boys dominated by calling out more often than girls. In the second class, students raised their hands and were called on by the teacher, who was likely to call on students who raised their hand first or most decisively, which was most often the boys. She concludes that everyone: teachers, boys and girls, use various linguistic and nonlinguistic interactional resources to contribute more, or less in some cases, to classroom talk, and asks an important question: “if a whole variety of linguistic and nonlinguistic features can be used to achieve or support ‘male dominance’, how successful are local solutions (such as changes in teachers’ classroom management strategies) likely to be?” (p.196).

2.3 Gaps and recommendations

Having reviewed the literature above, it is obvious that differential teacher treatment by gender, both in and out of an EFL/ESL context, is a common phenomenon, and one that is not often recognized by teachers themselves. The study of language education and gender is advancing, and “new and even experienced language teachers are still continuing to discover its importance for the first time” (Sunderland, 2000a:168). However, the need for further study has continually been expressed by many researchers throughout, especially in relation to EFL/ESL. Hassaskha and Zamir, (2013, p.9) state,

additional studies of these types are needed because the payoff comes in a number of ways. First, it more accurately portrays what actually occurs in the classroom [...] Second, it focuses on “equity of access”—a unique feature of the classroom culture criteria which allows teachers to reflect on their classroom events with a less biased approach, the result of which can be fair and equitable treatment of students as individuals and providing them with equal access to the full educational resources of the learning environment

(See also Yepez, 1994, p.131; Sunderland, 1994, p.150; Julé, 2004, p.28; Pakuła, Pawelczyk, and Sunderland, 2015, p.19). Studies of classroom talk in SL/FL classrooms are important because they can have an effect on educational policies on gender (Swann, 2011). In fact, Yepez (1994, p.121) mentions a

lack of “literature specifically intended for ESL teachers [...] that might alert them to potential biases in their classroom behavior”. More research can raise teachers’ as well as teacher trainers’ awareness, and promote change for equal educational opportunities and classroom practices.

2.4 Objectives of the study: Research questions

As there is much recommendation throughout the literature for further investigation, I chose to replicate and modify the data analysis methodology used in a study by Farooq (2009, 2010, 2011) that was conducted in a Japanese high school EFL classroom. He mentions that there has been considerable attention given to Japanese ESL students (Yepez, 1994; Gass and Varonis, 1986) in previous studies; however, “studies relating to Japanese learners in EFL contexts deserve more focus [...] simply because they are in majority” (Farooq 2009:53). I decided to investigate a female kindergarten teacher in Japan and the attention she pays to her students. Recently in Japan, more kindergartens are including English classes where they speak only in English (Ikegashira, Matsumoto, and Morita, 2009), and kindergartens with English-immersion programs are becoming more popular (see Maruko, 2012). It is therefore important that these contexts be investigated as they develop, particularly with regards to classroom interaction, so that research findings can be translated in to progressive classroom practices. Furthermore, research on gender and classroom interaction in SL/FL classrooms of young (kindergarten) learners is especially sparse. Therefore, it seemed important to investigate the classroom of a fellow teacher of young learners, as Byrnes (1994, p.196) suggests: “Self and peer observations by teachers can provide important insights into what we really do in class”.

In light of the preceding review of the background information and related arguments, the research question guiding this project is:

- I. Will a female teacher’s attention to four and five-year-old girls and boys in an English-immersion kindergarten classroom in Japan differ based on the sex of the child?

Julé (2004, p.28) emphasizes:

If teaching methods give little recognition to the possibility of gendered language experiences and create unequal language opportunities for the students as a result, if there is a marked difference in the use of linguistic space, then this needs to be examined by language education.

This suggests, as in Farooq’s (2009) study, a related question regarding the educational implications:

- II. Will the teacher’s attention to four and five-year-old girls and boys in an English-immersion

kindergarten classroom in Japan provide equal speaking (hence learning) opportunities for both girls and boys?

Taking into account Farooq's (2011) findings considering teacher-student interaction in a Japanese EFL high school classroom, along with gaps in the findings, this study aims to explore some of the same overarching and related specific questions to see whether the same patterns would also be observed in the present study. In order to answer the above general and implications questions, which correspond to those of Farooq (2009), further specific questions will investigate (i) the teacher's academic and non-academic moves directed to girls and boys, including types of eliciting moves (display/referential, and open/closed questions), (ii) the students' initiations and responses, both solicited and unsolicited, and (iii) the teacher's feedback, including affective, cognitive, and corrective feedback. The concepts and definitions employed in the questions relate to Sinclair and Coulthard's analytical categories.

Farooq's (2009, 2010, 2011) study, like previous research that I have done on classroom interactions (Cahill, 2015), focuses on teacher attention, regarding questions, wait-time, and feedback, to students. I chose to replicate and modify his data analysis methodology of employing the Sinclair and Coulthard (1995) model for analyzing classroom discourse as it is "specifically designed to analyze both teacher-student and student-teacher interactions" (Farooq, 2009:54), because he successfully employed the model to focus on gender-based classroom interactions, and finally, because it seemed possible for me to accomplish, given my own experience using a modified version of the model for conversational analysis (Francis and Hunston, 1995) in a previous study. Further discussion of the adopted and modified data analysis methodology, including its related concepts, reliability and applicability, will be provided in chapter 4.

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